The Soviet Image of the US

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The official Soviet picture of the US is by no means a full and accurate reflection of the Soviet leaders' actual perceptions. The elaborate exegesis—heavily overlaid with Marxist rhetoric and purveyed both publicly and in confidential Party briefings—serves a variety of purposes: propaganda, indoctrination, and the need for self-justification.

In important ways, what the Soviet leaders really think about the US is different. The judgments which shape their policy are almost certainly less dogmatic. This can be deduced both from the information we have on the private views of various Soviet leaders, and some of their principal advisers, and from Soviet behavior itself. But the ideological gap—augmented by cultural and historical differences and long-standing political rivalry—continues to exert a powerful influence on Soviet perceptions. The US that the Soviets see does not and cannot correspond to the one most Americans see.

There is no information gap facing the Soviet leaders, however. They have any amount of openly published US materials. They have the assessments of their diplomatic establishment in the US, headed by an ambassador with 12 years in his post, who knows his way around Washington and can report directly to the Politburo when he chooses to. The leaders themselves have had numerous private contacts with a variety of leading American figures. They have their KGB sources. And they have at their disposal the expertise of a sizable and growing corps of Soviet Americanologists, mainly in the Institute for the USA (IUSA), which since 1967 has been turning out a steady stream of studies on US foreign policy and domestic subjects.

Much of this information and analysis is no doubt fairly sound. Dobrynin is an astute and well-informed observer. While a good deal of the output of IUSA is tendentious, on the whole it is less so than the material carried in other Soviet publications. Many, though far from all, of the Institute staff when speaking off the record have demonstrated a good grasp of some aspects of American life and policy and a fair degree of open-mindedness. No doubt something of this knowledge and point of view gets through to upper political levels via IUSA's director, Arbatov, who has direct though limited access to the Politburo, and through the confidential studies IUSA is commissioned to do from time to time for high officials.

The experts on America tend, however, to be confused by the welter of information and impressions coming in to them. One can sympathize with the IUSA staffer who complained: "You have so many books and materials that it is not easy to determine what is good. . . . There are so many opinions, which is the majority opinion is difficult to know." * Much of the experts' output, in any case, has to be cleared by a branch of the Party apparatus, the International Department, before reaching top officials. In addition, the IUSA, because it stands out in the USSR as a strong proponent of Soviet-US detente, has all the more reason to carefully observe orthodox standards. Dobrynin no doubt watches his step also.

What counts in the end is what the Soviet leaders themselves make of all this. Unquestionably, there is no single, monolithic view. To a degree, differences in the roles and political needs of individual leaders are bound to affect their perceptions: Brezhnev, with primary responsibility for the success of detente as a whole; Kosygin, more particularly concerned with the problems of managing the USSR's economy and developing its technology; Suslov, steeped in Communist theory; Grechko, responsible for national defense and representing the military establishment; Andropov, responsible for internal discipline—no doubt each sees certain aspects of the US from his own special perspective. In general, however, they are all assailed by more

*Would that we could say the same about the USSR! A key asymetry between the two countries—which detente has done little to alter—is the difference in the amount of information routinely available to one side about the other. Soviet secrecy remains a major handicap to our military estimates, our political judgments, and our economic appraisals.

information than they can absorb, and it is inevitably filtered by the prejudices and experiences which their particular generation, the dominant one in the Politburo, share. Even so, they are frequently left with conflicting impressions, and for this reason they give great weight in their judgments about US policy to their evaluation of the personal qualities and intentions of top leaders in the US.

The following paragraphs attempt to describe how the Soviets assess the US international position, its economic and technological strengths, its military-strategic posture and intentions, the condition of its domestic political and social fabric, and, finally, in the light of these other factors, how they see the prospects for the further development of the kind of relationship with the US they are seeking.

THE US INTERNATIONAL POSITION

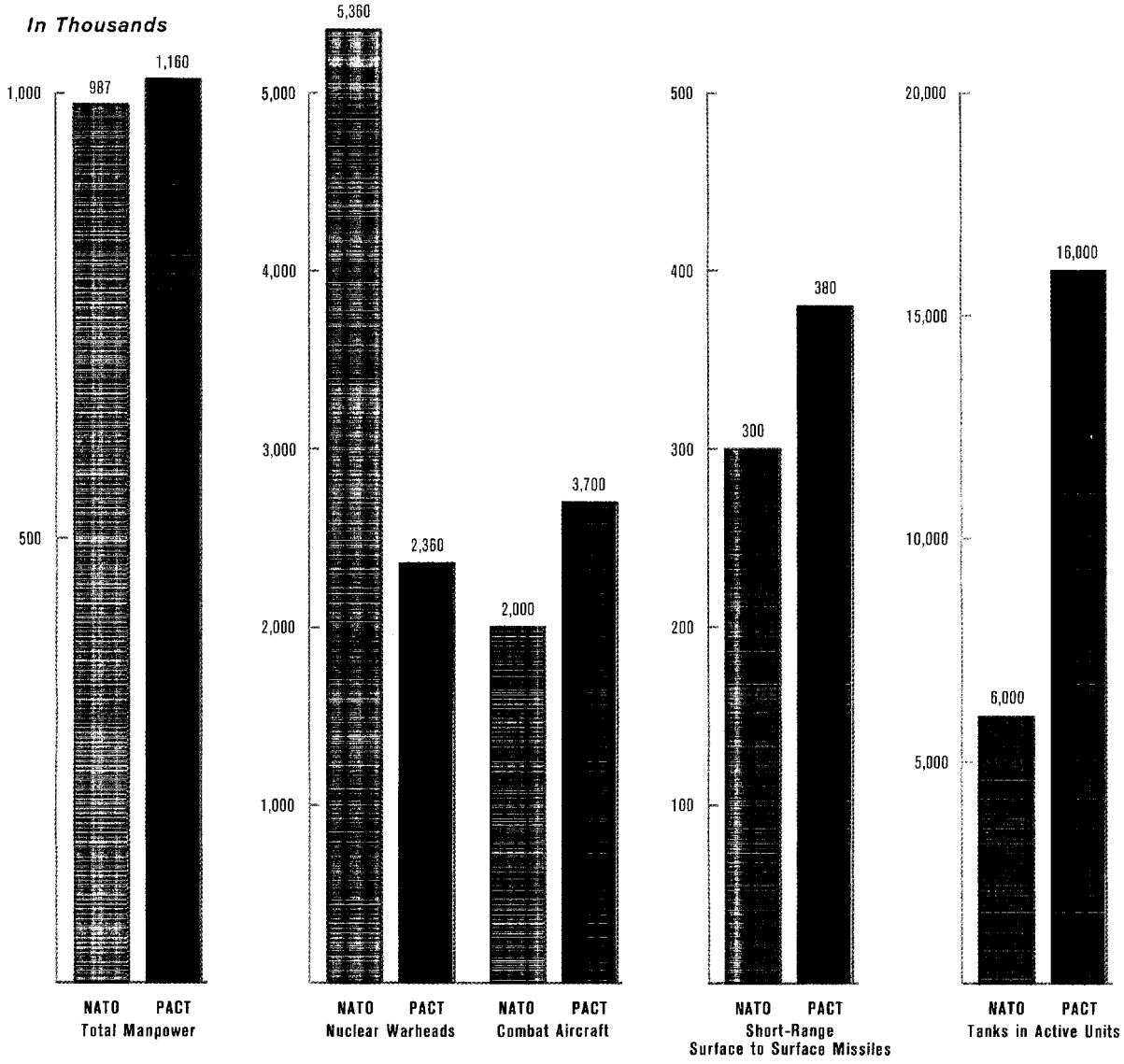
As compared with a decade ago, when their assessment was considerably less optimistic, the Soviets see the US position as having deteriorated on the international front as a whole. The Soviets believe that this has happened first of all because the US has lost its clear strategic superiority over them, and with it the ability to deal with the USSR from "positions of strength." Increasing multipolarity in the international system has, at the same time, eroded US political and economic influence in areas where these were once strong. The Soviets attribute the US decline to a further obvious cause: the aftermath of the Vietnam involvement with its cost in terms of US prestige in many parts of the world and in the confidence of the US itself in its international role. As a result, they believe US readiness to conduct an "interventionist" foreign policy based on anti-Communism has diminished, though not evaporated. US actions in Cambodia in 1970, the mining of Haiphong in 1972, and the US response in the Middle East in 1973 were taken as signs that the US could react sharply—and from their point of view unpredictably—if it considered itself challenged.

The Soviets see US authority in Western Europe weakened and major US allies there and elsewhere showing recurrent signs of resistance to US leadership. The US position is perceived as further undermined by conflict in the monetary and trade spheres arising from the same causes—the "contradictions" inherent in relations among the "capitalist states"—and by domestic pressure for a reduction of US military forces in Europe. Nevertheless, at the same time the Soviets expect the US—because of its military and economic weight and the disunity of its allies—to remain the dominant force in the Western alliance for some time to come. While they see signs of decay in NATO, they do not foresee its early dismantling. Because of their concerns about West Germany's potential power they would not, in fact, welcome an early or abrupt change in the US role in Europe.

These various international developments, coinciding with and exacerbating an array of domestic problems, according to the Soviet analysis forced the US to conclude that it had overextended itself abroad and that it lacked the resources to support its previous level of commitments. From this judgment arose a more "realistic" line in US policy and a desire for a relaxation of tensions with the USSR. Thus the USSR sees the US in the process of revising its commitments abroad and concomitantly reordering its domestic priorities. On this basis, the Soviets have reason to believe that the US will not or can not conduct its rivalry with the USSR on the same scale as before.

What further to expect, however—whether to look for a continuing contraction in the international presence and influence of the US—the Soviets are not sure. It is evident to them that the US still exercises enormous weight and authority throughout the world, in part because of its power, but also, more subtly, because its domestic wealth and life-style are, consciously or unconsciously, a model for many other societies. They see the US—despite some tendencies toward neo-isolationism within the country—engaged in changing "the whole structure of its foreign policy" in order to be able to maintain a powerful international role, but at less cost in terms of resources and domestic controversy. According to this view, the US aims at centering its foreign policy on four main salients—the USSR, the PRC, Western Europe, and Japan—and seeks to key its policy in other regions—the Mediterranean, the Indian and Pacific Oceans, Latin America, and Africa—to these major centers. The US accommodation with China is viewed as a crucial element in this design, as is also the US effort to shift some of its load to others by way of the Nixon Doctrine and burden-sharing in NATO.

NATO and Warsaw Pact Forces in the NATO Guidelines Area*



*These US best estimates probably approximate Soviet working figures as well.

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THE US ECONOMIC POSITION

Their ideology tells the Soviets that the Western economic system will some day go under. Meantime, their whole experience probably makes them genuinely believe that the US economy, because it is unplanned, is inherently unstable and subject to recurrent crises. Yet the Soviets also have a deeply imbedded respect and envy for US economic capacity. They have seen too many of their predecessors' predictions of a US collapse, or a Soviet "overtaking," go unfulfilled.

The present Soviet leaders have lived most of their lives in keen awareness of the great economic power of the US. Many have traveled in the US and have seen something of American industry and agriculture at first hand. They recognize the greater size of the US economy (one Soviet expert on the US stated privately that the US is 2-3 times richer than the USSR), and they acknowledge the production gap. Soviet publications regularly carry data comparing US and Soviet GNP, industrial production, and farm output which show a wide US lead in all these areas.

The Soviets likewise concede a substantial edge to the US in productivity, an index to which they assign increased weight as they seek to shift the emphasis in their own economy from extensive to intensive growth. Economic and party journals carry great numbers of articles on productivity comparisons and the sources of productivity growth. The US is often used as the yardstick in these comparisons. Other areas in which the Soviets see the US as having superiority, which contributes to these leads in production and productivity, are managerial techniques (where they are now avidly studying US practices) and consumer goods and services.

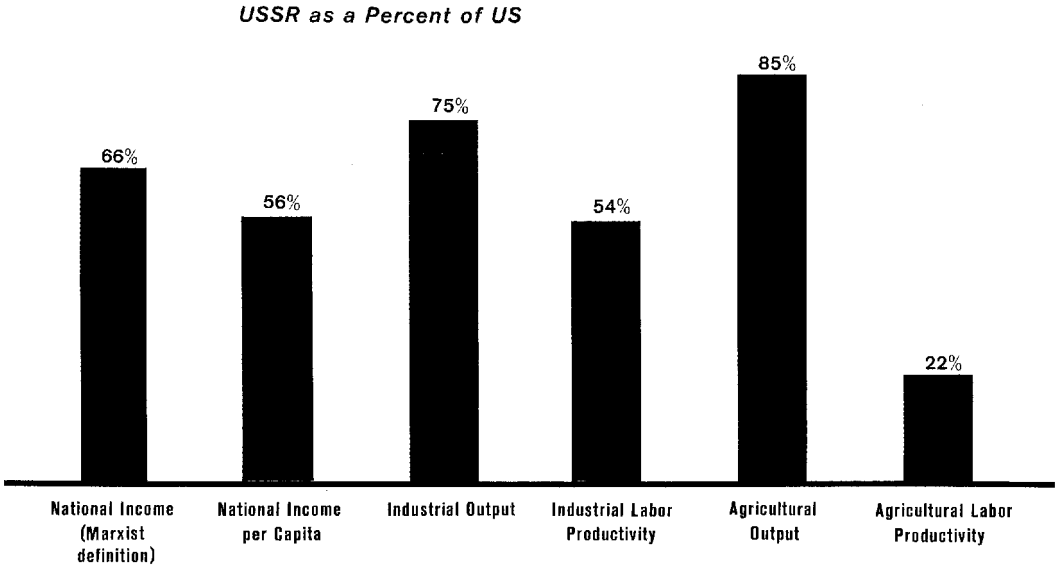
But especially critical from the Soviets' point of view, both for the present and the future, is the US scientific-technological capability, for which they have immense respect. They grant that the US is the world leader in many areas of high technology—computers, electronics, and chemical equipment—and is constantly moving further ahead. Another Soviet expert is quoted as saying (again privately) that he wished people in the USSR would stop talking about overtaking the US economically. While the USSR, he said, has more or less reached the US level in the gross output of certain basic commodities, the gap between our economies in the areas which really count is growing. He cited sophisticated chemicals, electronics, and precision instruments and tools as areas in which the US was moving further ahead of the USSR. In addition to conceding the US superiority in certain key areas of technology, the Soviets believe that the US is much better at knowing how to apply its technology, across the board.

As against these strengths, the Soviets can, of course, find plenty of evidence to support the argument that the US economy is in one of its cyclical crises, perhaps one of the worst ever: inflation, unemployment, a slowing rate of economic growth, balance-of-payments and balance-of-trade problems. Unemployment and inflation are the problems most frequently cited because these provide the most favorable US-Soviet comparisons. But in formulating their policy, the Soviets almost certainly pay greater heed to the underlying factors of strength than to what they suspect are transitory manifestations of weakness.

As for the US international economic position, the picture the Soviets perceive is a mixed one. They are prone to see US trade deficits, turmoil in the international financial markets, developing energy and raw materials stringencies, and the barriers that have been raised to US investment abroad as evidence that the advanced industrial nations and the underdeveloped nations are straining to break postwar US domination over them. They view increasing economic interdependence as a competition for markets, and probably view the nationalization of oil and mineral resources around the world as a landmark in the decline of the power of Western, especially American, corporations over international markets.

But the Soviets know that Americans will try to work their way out of the present difficulties and they more than half believe the US will succeed. They allow that the US dependence on foreign sources of energy and raw materials is not as critical as it is for other advanced industrial nations. Soviet observers also have serious doubts that the alleged challenge to US economic supremacy, coming principally from Western Europe and Japan, will be effective. It is problematical partly, as they see it, because the US is an economic colossus, and they question whether its competitors can stand up against it. The multinational corporation inevitably

A Soviet Comparison of the Soviet and American Economies, 1972



Note: These comparisons are taken from an official Soviet statistical handbook, *Narodnoye Khozyaystvo 1972*. CIA estimates of these comparisons are less favorable to the USSR, to wit: GNP, 53%; per capita GNP, 44%; industrial output, 67%; industrial labor productivity, 39%; agricultural output, 76%; agricultural labor productivity, 9%.

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strikes them as a US device for penetrating foreign economies and maintaining American control over them. And they recognize that the US has a major competitive advantage because of its scientific-technological superiority and the extensive infrastructure supporting it, which the developed Western nations and the underdeveloped ones, far more so, have little chance of overcoming.

THE US MILITARY-STRATEGIC POSTURE

The Soviet leaders believe that over the last decade the US has lost ground to the USSR in the military-strategic sphere. They think that the build-up of their forces over this period, especially strategic forces, has been a prime cause of a favorable shift in the international balance of power, which in turn has set the stage for detente and arms control negotiations. The course they now choose will depend to a good extent on their reading of US intentions and its ability to put them into effect. There is evidence of unresolved differences on this question, with one point of view holding that the US either still has, or is determined to regain, superiority over the USSR, and another which contends that the US wants, in fact is obliged to seek, a reduction of competition with the USSR in this sphere.

Among those advising the leadership there is clearly a group, comprised in good part of defense interests and the more doctrinaire Party elements, whose instinct—grounded in long Russian and Soviet tradition—is to believe that where defense is concerned, more is better. This naturally colors its perception of the USSR's chief rival. This group is darkly suspicious of US intentions, and unconvinced that the US can be induced to accept a strategic relationship satisfactory to the USSR. It puts forward a variety of assertions, which though not entirely consistent with one another, add up to a call for a continuing strong Soviet arms effort. Some of these arguments are that:

— While growing Soviet military power has progressively limited that of the US, the US remains a threat.

— With regard to strategic forces, the USSR is still in the business of catching up, its present advantages being more than offset on the US side by its forward-based systems, by its advantages in submarine systems, by its present and oncoming strategic bomber forces, by its substantial lead in MIRV technology, by the availability of British and French nuclear forces, and, not the least, because China is seen as posing a greater threat to the USSR than to the US.

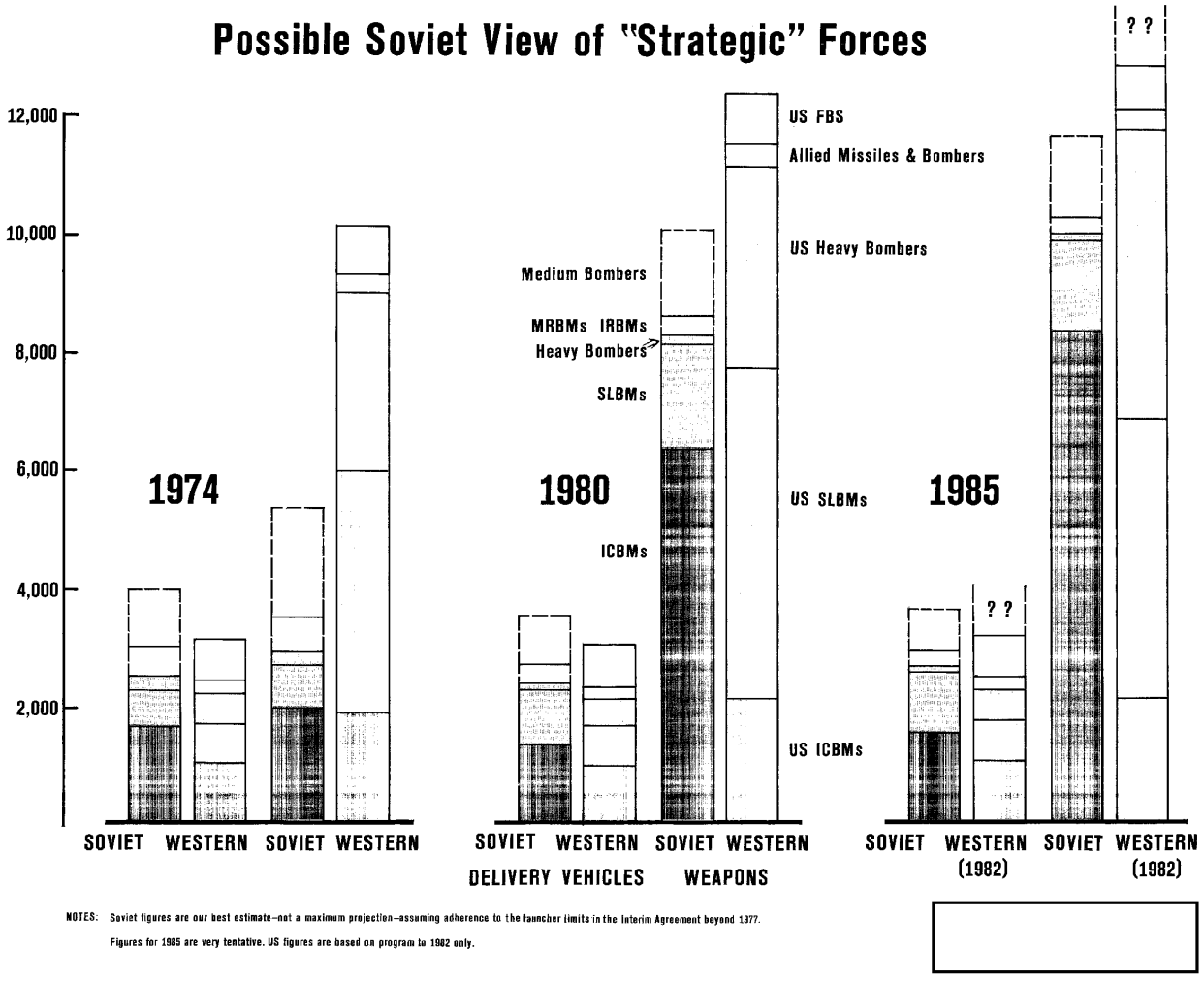
— The US is also seen as improving its conventional forces. Despite reductions in US forces abroad, their number in 1973 was higher than before the buildup in Vietnam began in 1964. The potential of these forces has been increasing as a result of military-technical progress. The performance of US arms in the Arab-Israeli war of October 1973 drew respectful attention. The US aims at making its military presence abroad "more flexible and effective and at the same time unobtrusive," this to be achieved in good part by assigning a larger role to naval forces.

— The US economic and technological capacity cannot be underestimated and US policy, under the influence of a powerful "military-industrial complex," is determined to achieve a clear military-strategic advantage over the USSR. Changes in US strategic targeting doctrine and plans for improving the capabilities of tactical nuclear weapons are evidence of the continuing strength of these elements in the US.

As against these views, there are, however, others which describe a more hopeful, less alarmist picture. Arbatov and some of his colleagues in the IUSA have been its most consistent advocates. While not denying the impressiveness of present and future US programs, they prefer to believe that significant changes have occurred in US military policy and aims. They say that the influence of the "military-industrial complex" is waning, and that political and economic pressures have forced US policy-makers to realize that they cannot have both "guns and butter." The competition between the US and the USSR is seen as shifting increasingly into non-military spheres. And they assert, somewhat audaciously, that the US is no longer intent on having military superiority. This, it is claimed, is one of the reasons the US and USSR were able to reach agreement in SALT I, as well as an argument in favor of pursuing further agreements.

The Soviet leaders evidently favor some aspects of the more "hawkish" view. Brezhnev for one gave indications at the last Moscow Summit that he

Possible Soviet View of "Strategic" Forces



NOTES: Soviet figures are our best estimate–not a maximum projection–assuming adherence to the launcher limits in the Interim Agreement beyond 1977.
Figures for 1985 are very tentative. US figures are based on program to 1982 only.

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takes seriously the alarmist picture of the US threat. He and others in the leadership probably question whether the USSR has in fact achieved strategic parity with the US and whether, if it has, it can be sure of maintaining it in the face of US technological capabilities. At the same time, while they are aware of domestic opposition to defense programs in the US and will persist in cultivating it, they note its general ineffectiveness to date. Consequently, they have not concluded that the US government is losing its capacity to fund present programs and they are likely to believe that, rather than faltering or falling behind, US military programs will continue to be formidably competitive.

Still, Arbatov et al would almost certainly not offer a different view, implying a readiness in important US quarters to reduce the burden of arms competition, if they thought the issue was settled in the leaders' minds. Thus the leaders' verdict is apparently not yet in. As long as they are unclear about the extent of US tolerance or competitiveness, their most likely course with respect to their strategic arms programs is to proceed along the line of seeing "what the traffic will bear."

US POLITICS AND SOCIETY

Soviet perceptions of the US politics and society are severely obscured by simplistic ideological precepts which assert that the political process is merely a contest for power between competing economic monopolies and the social process a function of class struggle. US politics—the electoral process, the two-party system, the division of power—are essentially a puzzle to Soviet leaders. The Americanologists have been gaining in knowledge and experience. For example, they have done reasonably well in forecasting the outcome of major US elections in recent years (relying heavily on American polls and commentaries) and have on occasion demonstrated a good grasp of the intricacies of regional political situations. But where more is needed than a simple accumulation of facts and figures, they are still in trouble.

Throughout, neither the Soviet leaders nor the experts fathomed the meaning of the Watergate issue nor did they foresee its denouement, even when this loomed close. It was seen from the beginning as an attempt on the part of elements unfriendly to the USSR to undermine detente between the US and USSR—and this interpretation still persists to some extent. It is also clear, from their reactions not only to the Watergate process but also to the controversy over most-favored-nation status, that they have had difficulty in assessing Congress' role in the American system.

The Soviet leaders regard the US political process as erratic and extremely disorderly. Their own values make them contemptuous of these factors; they cannot share in the respect inspired in other countries by the final outcome of Watergate. They may feel that a system with such weaknesses cannot endure forever. But they foresee no early collapse, and for now they seem more impressed by its unpredictability than its instability—thus their occasional complaints about "zig-zags" in US policy.

As for US social conditions, there are not a few phenomena which tend to confirm preconceived Soviet notions of a society ridden by fundamental internal contradictions: the problems of the cities, youthful alienation, racial conflict, crime, drugs, etc. The Soviets, given their own conception of permissible civic behavior, social discipline, and morality, are inclined to see the US in a state of social decay. But the Soviets are unable to perceive the clear makings of revolutionary change in American society among those elements they would ordinarily look to to bring it about. Of these, the various militant black and student movements for which they had had some hopes now appear less promising because of their factionalism, proneness to violence, and lack of "revolutionary perspective." And they recognize that their chances of ever winning the sympathy or allegiance of organized American labor are less than ever.

THE OVERALL SOVIET ASSESSMENT

Altogether, then, the Soviet perception of the US is based on a blend of dogmatic assumptions and pragmatic deductions, some firm, some tentative, some arousing hope and some causing anxiety. The Soviets believe generally that US international power has declined in recent years as Soviet power has been growing, and that the US is in difficulties at home. Almost certainly, this assessment—important to the Soviet leaders psychologically as well as politically—has figured in the calculations underlying their approach to detente, giving them grounds to hope that the US will treat with them on terms which meet their definition of "equal security." In short, the picture as seen from Moscow supports a sense of confidence that they can hold their own, but less assurance about future

gains. Though convinced of a US decline in the world, the Soviets do not exaggerate its extent nor discount the chances of recuperation. They see the US economic position faltering but remain more impressed by the efficiency and productive capacity of the US economy and US technological superiority. They are not persuaded that the US has lost the will and ability to conduct a vigorous military competition with them. And while they consider the US to be hampered by domestic political and social problems, their understanding of these is insufficient to permit them to draw conclusions useful for policy. In many areas, US government and society continue to act in ways which baffle them, which cannot be fitted into the hypotheses they have constructed. Thus, speaking to the 24th Party Congress in 1971 in broad ideological terms, Brezhnev asserted that "the general crisis of capitalism continues to deepen" but quickly added the warning that Communists were "confronting the last, but the most powerful, of all the exploiting systems that have ever existed."

THE US AND THE FUTURE OF DETENTE

For the Soviets, detente with the US is regarded not merely as important for reducing the danger of nuclear conflict, but also as an approach which will help them to shore up weak points in their international and domestic positions. As they see it, the US after losing momentum, direction, and confidence in its foreign policies and being unsettled by developments at home, was compelled to turn toward conciliation and cooperation with the USSR. They have believed consequently that there is a good chance that detente will bring them advantages above and beyond reducing the risk of superpower confrontation.

In seeking to explain to themselves and their followers why they have adopted their present policies, the Soviet leaders and their analysts have constructed a misshapen picture of the US. It is flawed not only by misperceptions but also by their urge to demonstrate, by reference to its present difficulties, that the US has no alternative to detente. The optimists among Soviet observers have gone some way toward convincing themselves that this is so, and that the trend toward detente in the US is irreversible. They argue that the "realists" in the US—the pro-detente elements—are dominant in both public and government; the remaining opposition to detente is a diminishing residue of the Cold War, and tendencies favoring a new relationship with the USSR are firm and durable. They are disposed to believe that the US, because of its domestic and international economic problems and the natural cupidity of its capitalists, wants access to the Soviet market as much as they themselves want US capital and technology.

But there is more than a touch of wishful thinking in the views of the optimists. They are under pressure to prove that the departure of their first detente partner, ex-President Nixon, has not invalidated their policy. And even they note that there are many in the US—and not only members of the "military-industrial complex," Zionists, and professional Cold Warriors—who have become doubtful about the USSR's policies and its aims in detente. They have been disappointed to discover that among these are American liberals whom they had expected to be sympathetic to detente. Accordingly, their confidence in the future of detente is diluted. One of the most prominent members of this school, Arbatov, has written: ". . . the future of relations between the USSR and the US cannot fail to depend on how consistently the two powers stick to the policy of detente. The picture emerging in this area in the US seems quite complex and contradictory to the Soviet scholars studying that country."

The Soviet leaders have much to lose if detente goes off the tracks. They find it difficult to conceive of alternative policies which promise to help them equally with such problems as their technological needs and China's dangerous challenge. Thus their instinct will be not to jump to conclusions about US strengths and will. At the same time, in pondering their approach to the US in coming years, the Soviet leaders are likely to be pulled in more than one direction. To the extent that they regard trends in the US as moving in the right direction from their point of view, they will be inclined to cultivate these "healthy tendencies" by exercising restraint in their own policies. But their conduct will also be colored by the suspicion that the US will never willingly concede equality to the USSR, and that their own power—in its various aspects—must be constantly tended if they are going to catch up and eventually pull ahead of the US. And whichever way they are leaning at any given time, they will be susceptible to opportunism—to their habit of pushing on American pressure points where they see them.

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